

Were You There? Sermon Series
Sermon #3 – The Centurion
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I wonder what it would have been like to be there, to actually witness the crucifixion. Many moviemakers have tried. I still remember the first time I saw Franco Zeffirelli's version of the crucifixion in "Jesus of Nazareth." Absolutely haunting. Or the climax of the play "Jesus Christ Superstar," where the silence is an eerie contrast to the rest of the musical. And no one who saw "The Passion of the Christ" will forget Mel's Gibson version of the story. To eyewitnesses, it must have been so solemn, so heartrending, so unnatural.

Except for one eyewitness. For him, this wasn't the crucifixion of Jesus; it was another day at work. For the centurion, there was nothing supernatural going on at Golgotha, it was simply the execution of three more criminals. He'd done this before, hundreds, maybe thousands of times. And yet Mark tells us, "When the centurion saw how Jesus died..."

At the beginning of the day we now know as Good Friday, this Jesus wasn't anyone special to the centurion. He probably looked the other way when the soldiers mocked Jesus and embedding the crown of thorns into his head. That guy would be dead soon, anyway. When the time came for the crucifixion, he probably nailed Jesus to the cross like he was hanging a picture in his living room. Thump, thump, thump, through skin and bone. Just another criminal. Why should the centurion care?

His life had been full of these violent vignettes. The centurion was the equivalent of the sergeant-major; in command of a group of 100 men. He would have been a career soldier, well-paid and well-regarded within the Roman Empire. He had fought in many battles, seen many men die, probably killed a bunch by his own hand. So this day was no different. This wasn't murder; this was work, and not particularly exciting work at that.

Unfortunately, he knew what criminals were like. His job was to deal with them, to dole out the punishment handed down by the governors and curates of Rome. He got the dirty job of carrying out the sentence. He wasn't the judge or the jury, but he sure was the executioner, and he was prepared to execute Jesus, then go home for a sit-down meal with his wife and kids. And yet, when he saw how he died...

Imagine what he had to put up with as he did his job, as he gave those criminals what they deserved by pegging their hands and feet to 2x4s with metal spikes. The centurion probably endured a lot of shouting and cursing. Pleading. Anger. Violence. Fear. He'd heard it all before. He knew what to expect. What would this one do, this...what's his name again? Curse at him? Spit in his face? Try to kick him or gouge his eyes? Plead for mercy? Not sure, but it will be one of those. They all do something.

And yet, as the nails went through his hands –thump, thump, thump – there was nothing. As the spikes splintered the bones in his feet – nothing. What did the centurion see in Jesus' eyes? It wasn't hate or anger. When he saw how he died...what did he see?

From the cross, Jesus speaks: "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." When one of the thieves being crucified next to Jesus asks to be remembered, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Was the centurion close enough to hear these words? "What does he mean, forgive them?"

Is he talking about me? What paradise? Who is this man? The sign above his head says, 'King of the Jews.' Is this man a king? The crowd is yelling at Jesus, 'He's saved others, but he won't save himself.' He's saved others? How? From what? He can save himself, but he doesn't?" What did the centurion see?

The centurion knew that most people took a long time to die on a cross. The actually died from suffocation, as their weakening leg muscles were no longer able to support their body weight, and they slouched so far down that their lungs were compressed. That could take many hours, even days. But after only three hours, this man – Jesus, his name is Jesus – dies. But he doesn't die the way most crucified people die. Usually they fade away, their breaths becoming shallower and shallower, their voice becoming softer and softer, until they simply expire. If you weren't paying attention, you might not even know they were gone.

But not this Jesus. With a loud cry, he breathed his last. A loud cry! Who would have the power to do that after three hours on a cross? A powerless death ends with a powerful cry, and when the centurion heard his cry and saw him die with unimaginable dignity and compassion for others, he says, "Surely this man was the son of God!"

That's more than a bold proclamation; it's a statement of faith. Don't we make the same confession we when we join the church? "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God?" "Yes, I do." It's the same thing God says at Jesus' baptism: "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased." The centurion didn't see the manger, didn't see the miracles, didn't hear the teachings. He only saw mockery and death. And yet what he saw was enough to make him believe. The Roman soldier, who's engineered countless surrenders, surrenders himself. The one who has pledged his allegiance to the emperor now claims a higher authority.

The problem is his story ends there. We know nothing about what happens after this. What's the next chapter in his life? We'd like to think he was a new being, a true convert. A man of war won over by the Prince of Peace. A career soldier rejects the empire he serves for a greater kingdom. But we don't know. There are many stories like this in the gospels, open-ended stories. We know the prodigal son returned home, but did he stay? Did Zaccheus give back all the money he promised? We don't know, do we?

Maybe the centurion's momentary epiphany remained momentary. Maybe he weighed the significance of this revelation with the reality that life is a really just a series of compromises. Maybe he realized that this empire he served, whether the ultimate authority or not, kept a roof over his family's head and food on their table. Maybe this moment of clarity washed over him like a great wave, but then receded, as waves do, taking a bit of sand with it, leaving the ground beneath his feet a little less stable. And in short order he would return to his life of accomplishment and enforcing order and overseeing crucifixions. We just don't know.

So we are left standing at the foot of the cross, next to the centurion. We also hear the cry, we also see how he dies, and we have the benefit of knowing that soon there will be an empty tomb. And now we face the same question: what's next for us? How will the next chapter be written? Will our faith, born and fed in these extraordinary circumstances, take root and flourish? Or will it wither away?

I like talking about faith in living terms, because that's how I have experienced it. Faith is not some stagnant, lifeless memento you acquire and then put on a shelf to collect dust. Faith is a living, breathing organism that requires care and feeding. It's like taking

care of a child. The responsibility of raising a child doesn't end when the child is born – if only it were that easy! The birth is only the beginning! Likewise, the responsibility of being a Christian doesn't end when we make the confession that we believe Jesus is the son of God. It's only the beginning, and it takes a lifetime of nurture and challenge to help it grow strong and healthy.

And that includes spending some time at the foot of the cross. We don't like to be there: all that blood, all that crying, all that anguish. The cross isn't a pretty place to be. But our lives are filled with unpretty places: doctor's offices, funeral homes, the empty space beside us in our bed, the empty room of the child who's now gone away. And the only way we can survive the unpretty places in our lives is to see how Jesus survived in his. With dignity. With forgiveness. And most of all, with faith.

I think that's what the centurion saw that made him believe. He thought he knew Jesus – just another criminal, just another low-life. That's what others had said about him. He thought he knew this man. And yet, when he really looked at him, he saw someone different. Very different. He saw faith in a way he'd never seen faith before. "Surely this man is the son of God."

Have you looked at Jesus? Not a once-a-week passing glance; I mean really looked. I know you know what others say about him. You hear it every Sunday right here. We think we know Christ, but what if we allowed ourselves to see him in a new way? What if this time around, we didn't stand at a distance during Holy Week, we didn't skip Maundy Thursday, we didn't go about our routine on Good Friday. What if we really stopped, and looked, and listened, if we prayed out of desire instead of out of habit, or instead of not praying at all? What would we see? What would we hear? What would we say? How would our lives change? I don't know. I don't know. But I know this. The answers to our questions are at the foot of the cross, and that's where we have to go. And if being at the cross allowed a hardened, faithless Roman soldier to see the face of God, what might be waiting for us?